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SUBJECT: BAVARIAN HOME PARTY FIGHTS FOR LOCAL SUPPORT,
NATIONAL RELEVANCE BY SNIPING AT MERKEL

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Classified By: Eric G. Nelson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Christian Social Union (CSU) party chief Horst Seehofer must prove to voters that his weakened party is still standard bearer for Bavaria in order to make the five percent hurdle in the June 7 European Parliamentary elections. He is casting his party as an indispensable faction representing Bavaria in the European Parliament and as an independent-minded national coalition partner in Berlin. CSU sniping about Chancellor Merkel's leadership style is making headlines, with the leadership focusing on relatively minor issues like the Chancellor's criticism of the Pope. Slowly, more important issues, like fiscal conservatism, have surfaced but it is still too early to know whether the economic crisis will develop into a powerful issue dominating a majority of the voters, attention in Bavaria. The question is whether the voters who rejected the CSU in September 2008 will warm again to Minister President Seehofer's populist return to the basic themes of Christian and social values. End Summary.

First Challenge: Winning Seats in the EU Parliament

¶2. (C) The results of European Parliament elections on June 7 will determine how the CSU goes into the Bundestag elections on September 27, according to Michael Hoehenberger (protect), head of Policy Planning in the Bavarian State Chancellery and personal advisor to Horst Seehofer, Bavarian Minister President (CSU). In meetings on March 12 and again on March 25, Hoehenberger admitted to PolConsul that the CSU was in the fight of its life to remain powerful inside Bavaria and thus relevant on the national and European stages. Separately, in our private meetings over the last few months with politicians from the Free Democratic Party (FDP), Greens, and Freie Waehler (Independents), we have consistently heard the same thing: that the CSU is worried about a low voter turnout rate since the European parliamentary election falls during a major local holiday. This, combined with lower approval ratings, could significantly damage its chances in the EU election.

¶3. (C) Hoehenberger expressed confidence that if the CSU wins EU seats, the party would then close ranks with the CDU in the September Bundestag elections. On the other hand, a loss at the EU level would weaken the CSU and alter its relationship with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in unforeseeable ways, he feared.

Merkel's Image and Style Are Dominant Issues Now

¶4. (C) Hoehenberger said that the CSU believes Chancellor

Merkel comes across to Bavarians as aloof and her image has suffered when compared to President Obama's dynamic & star power.⁸ Merkel and Seehofer have contrasting personalities and backgrounds. Merkel is viewed locally as cool and analytical. She is a Protestant from East Germany and has a university degree. Seehofer, a Catholic, has no university degree. He has a &hail good fellow well met⁸ character and is known as the &Robin Hood of the Little People.⁸ At the party's rally on Ash Wednesday, he cited sad memories of his poor childhood as justification for his support of a new school lunch program. Even his critics concede that no one in the CDU/CSU knows more about social issues and health reform than he.

¶5. (C) While there are internal CDU grumblings about leadership qualities lacking in the CDU chairwoman, the CSU is criticizing Merkel to enhance its prospects in Bavaria. Hoehenberger recited popular criticism of Merkel's handling of Pope Benedict, which he said had alienated Catholics all over Germany but rankled nowhere more than in the Pope's native Bavaria. He then mentioned Merkel's subsequent resistance to defending Erika Steinbach, President of the Federation of (Sudeten) Expellees, which annoyed their representatives everywhere but especially in Bavaria where Minister President Seehofer is their honorary chairman. They make up a strong minority voting bloc and Seehofer recently pleased them when he awarded Steinbach a Bavarian Order of Merit, an immediate reaction to Merkel's cool distance from the affair.

¶6. (C) Regarding the economic crisis, Hoehenberger argued that Merkel fails society by not &taking people by the

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hand⁸ to &give them a sense of security and of being protected.⁸ Her dismissal of Opel as - critical for the German economy⁸ was particularly poorly handled, he charged, noting &it might be true but she did not have to say it in a way that unsettled people.⁸ With the rise of Karl-Theodore zu Guttenberg, the new and charismatic Economics Minister and CSU leader, there is another potentially unflattering comparison. Hoehenberger added that Merkel's public persona suffers from her years as leader of the CDU/CSU/SPD coalition, which has progressively dulled her CDU patina and undermined her bona fides with the conservative CSU party faithful.

¶7. (SBU) There are reports that Seehofer is encouraging criticism of Merkel within the party. During Sunday afternoon strategy sessions at CSU headquarters in Munich, he reportedly backs up those who criticize the grand coalition in Berlin, even at the expense of the CDU. CSU EU deputies Markus Ferber and Manfred Weber have dutifully attacked Merkel's lack of leadership qualities, and Emilia Mueller, Bavarian Minister for European Affairs, has piled on. However, former Minister President Gunther Beckstein told the Consul General recently that he had his doubts about the effectiveness among the rank and file of Seehofer's approach attacking Merkel.

The CSU Seeks Support of Traditional Voters

¶8. (C) &Traditional voters are our pillar,⁸ Seehofer wrote in a recent &Bayernkurier⁸ newspaper editorial. &We have to strengthen our traditional voters rather than rely on uncertain voters who switch from one party to another.⁸ Separately, Beckstein confirmed this to the Consul General, noting that the CSU's main problem, according to polls, is loss of conservative voters to FW and FDP. Hoehenberger said that for the European Parliamentary elections, the CSU will focus on Christian and social justice themes as well as renewal of the Social Market economic model (&Soziale Marktwirtschaft⁸) in Germany, Bavarian autonomy, and agricultural issues. They are also making an issue of health care reform, focusing on the health fund and doctors,

salaries.

Comment

¶9. (C) The CSU is in a difficult position. It has to be a wheel squeaky enough to rally Bavarian support and enough voter turn out to ensure they make the five percent hurdle nationwide for entry into the European Parliament. In raising its political profile with Bavarian voters and showing how it is different from all the other parties, it must also remain true to its sister party, the CDU.

Seehofer's strategy is to win back support through rejuvenating the party and focusing attention on traditional issues. His stated disdain for courting new voter groups might backfire if significant segments of his base continue to believe that the CSU's time has passed and stay at home on June 7 or cast support elsewhere. If the CSU secures its place as a European regional power, it is likely that it will stop sniping at the Chancellor and line up with the CDU for the September Bundestag elections.

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